

BOOK REVIEWS

***Cirque Global: Quebec's Expanding Circus Boundaries*. Edited by Louis Patrick Leroux and Charles Batson. Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2016. 400 pp.**

Reviewed by Peta Tait

As I read this important book about the extraordinary artistic achievement of contemporary circus, or “cirque,” associated with Montreal, I was able to view a performance included in its analysis. On tour again in Australia, Les 7 Doigts de la Main were performing *Triptyque* to appreciative audiences in Melbourne—another geographical hub of contemporary circus with numerous companies and a university degree-level training course. *Triptyque's* captivating, distinctively original circus performance with dance choreographers (42) follows after three large Australian circus productions with serious opera, confirming a recent international trend to include circus alongside the “high” arts. The edited volume, *Cirque Global: Quebec's Expanding Circus Boundaries*, provides an in-depth analysis of the origins, innovations, and aesthetics of the distinctive, influential artistic oeuvre exported from regional Canada. The specialization of this book attests to the preeminence of Canadian contemporary circus, as well as the maturity of the study of circus arts internationally. While the focus is on companies and artists operating from Quebec, the frameworks and theoretical approaches in the chapters offer a proliferation of insights about contemporary circus that readers might comparatively apply to their own context.

The editors, Louis Patrick Leroux and Charles Batson, are to be commended for the conceptualization and realization of this inspiring book offering a breadth of disciplines from which to approach circus. Although most of the chapters are by academics and writers with higher degrees, the book is extremely relevant to circus artists and students, as well as researchers. The accessible commentary means that it should also reach general readers. Chapters cover the major circus organizations in Montreal—including Canada's National Circus School, the TOHU centre, Cirque du Monde—and the circus companies, especially Cirque du Soleil (Cirque). Knowledgeable contributors, such as Leroux, Batson, and Erin Hurley, provide a solid foundation for understanding the unique dimensions of this artistic “cirque” work. One of the strengths of the book is that most contributors balance discussion of companies with invaluable details about production, including the economic dimension, and Hurley's application of ideas of the “experience economy” to cirque provides crucial understanding of the appeal of the art form (75). The historical background is provided by the widely acknowledged expertise of Pascal Jacob and by Julie Boudreault's diligent archival work, and their chapters outline essential information about traditional circus and contemporary circus precedents. Chapters also cover management, and Isabelle Mahy contributes a revealing ethnographic study of difficult working relationships between artists and managers. Hence the book should serve purposes beyond circus studies, such as the university business subjects that use Cirque as a case study. The book offers new research on creative processes, urban renewal, architectural connections, circus venues, and the rapidly expanding application of ethnographic analysis within circus training practices.

Susan Bennett writes lucidly and informatively on “place identity” and the efforts of cities to capitalize on Cirque's creative business to hasten urban renewal and gentrification. Simon Harel evaluates one of its failed casino-hotel-venue projects in Montreal in relation to Las Vegas architecture, brand power, and proposals for other locations. By my third visit to Las Vegas, however, I struggled with the moral implications of the casino-hotel-family holiday package business model there, and that seems to underpin Cirque's empire. After enthusiastically praising the Cirque du Soleil productions that I had seen in Canada and Las Vegas in the 1990s, I have

become far more guarded as the touring shows reaching Australia are much weaker, often with a fourth generation of performers, and I consider *Wintuck* in New York an artistic “lemon.”

A number of chapters investigate or touch on the cultural meaning of productions in reception, and there are valuable explorations. In particular, Karen Fricker’s chapter on Cirque du Soleil’s *Totem* provides an excellent analysis that probes the effect of this problematic show. She points out that it is not so much the animal-human identity in an evolutionary context that was disturbing, but where indigeneity was located in this depiction. (Why did this show contravene the standard protective circus costuming of flesh-coloured tights to present “fleshy” bodies in such acts?) Regardless, as Fricker points out, physical bodies resist metaphor (155). The problems of staging indigeneity with an indigenous performer as an interlude within a bigger show were complex. I found this production particularly troubling at the nexus of indigeneity and animality, and because the celebration of cultural difference was poorly conceived in the sequence of staging, so its artistic intention was undercut and remained opaque for an international audience. Fricker concludes that in the slippage of possible meanings within nonverbal physical performance, the show ends up inadvertently conjuring up the past and its “instrumentalization and objectification” of indigenous identity (157).

In addition to critiquing company histories, some chapters also critique these in relation to recent historical and cultural events. Tracy Zhang’s exemplary scholarship explores Québécois and Chinese circus connections from the 1950s to the early 1980s, confirming an influence evident in contemporary circus internationally. This is an important chapter because it shows how circus, like dance, initially functioned as a type of diplomacy, a central feature of its political world. The way that the export of acrobatics provided a source of income is an interesting point and continues today albeit from different geographical regions. Despite the collaboration with Canadian artists, the Shanghai show *Era* still seemed more like traditional circus than contemporary circus artistry to me. In a notable synthesis of significant intersections of politics and circus, Jennifer Beth Spiegel explores examples of artistic street protest from the early 1980s to student political protest in 2012 against the background paradox provided by Cirque’s origins in street performance.

The value of a book of this type is its capacity to provide sustained and thoughtful analysis, and on the whole it succeeds admirably. Translated articles include Sylvain Lavoie’s musing on circus and satisfy a major frustration for all circus scholars with the way circus research is divided up by language and the ongoing difficulty of obtaining citable scholarly translations. While *Cirque Global* is an important addition to what has become an established field of international publications on contemporary circus arts, it also aligns with those that incorporate a dual language context.

For all of the book’s strengths and acknowledging the difficulties with translation, I am obliged to point out problems. As a performance studies academic who has written on the research methodologies used for circus over and above those commonly used for researching live performance, I find the book’s use of circus scholarship and argument, and its conceptual precedents, somewhat ad hoc, which detracts from its scholarly value. In one example that might puzzle other international readers, while recent books by the leading Canadian scholar Paul Bouissac might be sidelined as being more about traditional circus, Kenneth Little’s scholarly articles on Archaos in Canada do seem relevant. The commentary would benefit in places from a more careful use of terms and definitions. For example, there is an inaccurate definition of “pantomime,” without an authoritative reference; theatrical pantomime can be spoken. “Persona” is the more widely used term for the reception of physicalized presence in nonverbal, image-based performance. While a glossary is useful, some sources would enhance it.

The chapters on training, creative production, and company working processes indicate where the book is immediately relevant to circus practitioners, who often work as teachers. Leroux outlines the artistry evident in emerging new companies to maintain the momentum. Deborah and Norma Rantisi provide a well-researched account of creativity, governmental policies, and subsidy in supporting company practices. Of great interest is the chapter by Sylvain Lafortune, Jon Burt, and Patrice Aubertin about the application of “decision training” from sports training to circus. This lucid account should be read by all circus trainers. While the findings of the study are inconclusive about whether the applied process for cognitive development enhanced the circus training, the chapter presents the proposition that trainers and teachers need to regularly reevaluate how they approach their work with students. It confirms that under institutional and production time pressures, teachers apply what they know while experimentation with pedagogy requires more sympathetic institutional support. Nonetheless, a report on this type of research into training is invaluable.

Cirque Global confirms my belief that it is the vision of key individuals within the milieu that is the vital ingredient even for a collaborative art form such as circus—and its scholarship. As indicated, there are numerous ways in which this book will benefit contemporary circus and its study. I read it with enjoyment because it confirms that contemporary circus arts are now receiving the serious intellectual attention that they deserve.